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Arrest in Poland Feeds Pressler's Headline Hunger

Larry Pressler, the weathervane Republican senator from the plains of South Dakota, made the headlines recently when he managed to get himself "arrested" for taking pictures of a food line in Warsaw.

Actually, it was no big deal. The Senate's likable lightweight was snapping away when some plain-clothesmen came up and began questioning him. State Department sources say Pressler told the cops he had official permission to take pictures, but they detained him anyway. Half an hour later, he was released.

The question that remains is: What was the senator doing in Poland in the first place? He's a member of the Foreign Relations Committee. But, my sources say, he dreamed up the idea and subsequently sought the committee's endorsement. And he certainly wasn't in Poland as an emissary of the Reagan administration.

In fact, I've learned that Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. explicitly advised Pressler against making the trip. Here's the story:

Five days before his scheduled de-

parture, Pressler sent a hand-delivered message to Haig, informing him that he was going to Poland unless the secretary disapproved. Two days later, Haig's response arrived, also hand-delivered.

Haig made his disapproval about as clear as a Cabinet officer can when addressing a senator. Signed "Al," the secretary's letter warned that the Polish military government might use Pressler's visit for its own propaganda purposes. If a U.S. senator could travel around Poland without incident, it could be used to demonstrate that the country was back to normal under the martial-law crackdown.

Pressler delayed his departure for exactly one day. Then he set off, stopping in Rome for an audience with Pope John Paul II. The pope obviously has his own avenues of communication to his countrymen, but he obligingly supplied the senator with a message to deliver to the Polish people.

Thus Pressler's junket to Warsaw was frowned on by the State Department; his status as a papal legate was dubious at best. Why did he go? The senator's track record as an indefatigable publicity-seeker makes the conclusion inescapable: He went to Poland in a self-promotional effort to get his name in the papers and on the evening news shows.

Judging by his votes in both houses of Congress, Pressler's career might seem to be based on inconsis-

tency. But he has in fact been guided by one fixed star—favorable mention in the press. There is little he won't do, apparently, to buff up his image as an honest farm boy from America's heartland. That's no mean trick for an alumnus of Oxford and Harvard.

During the initial Abscam disclosures, Pressler's insatiable headline-hunger led him to exaggerate his quite respectable role in the scandal.

He let it be known that he had indignantly spurned the FBI undercover agent's offer of a bribe and stormed out "after two or three minutes," having told the tempters that their suggestions were illegal.

Yet the transcripts of the video tapes reveal none of Pressler's indignation. He did indeed refuse their not-so-subtle bribe offers, but he chatted amicably with them for half an hour, and never used the word "illegal" once. In short, while Pressler's conduct was nothing to be ashamed of, he couldn't resist the temptation to puff up the incident into an act of extravagant purity.

Footnote: Haig had requested only that the trip be "delayed" while he was in Europe, Pressler said, and he complied. "The general conclusion," said the senator, "is that the trip was beneficial to the [State] department, and it was very beneficial to me." He said he had dispatched a report on the trip to the president and had briefed the vice president, the CIA and the State Department.